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AUTHOR Condon, George A.
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ABSTRACT

The importance of human and political factors in college planning is emphasized by a veteran faculty member and administrator. Three examples are cited, based on experiences at California State University-Northridge; West Virginia University, and the community surrounding the College of the Virgin Islands. One "real world" factor that affects a purely rational approach to planning involves the search for extramural funds. Too often schools make hasty adaptations of existing college plans and structures in order to meet the demands of funding agencies. Another issue concerns how planning relates to campus governance, and specifically how to integrate the activities of planning committees while preserving spontaneity in planning decisions. It is emphasized that planners need to make an accommodation with forces, internal and external to the college, that tend to challenge the orderliness of planning efforts. Political and human realities have legitimacy and preferential status in the planning process. Additional topics include long-range planning, and the importance of the president's or chancellor's commitment to the planning process. (SW)

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PLANNING IN THE REAL WORLD OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Dr. George A. Condon
Vice President for Academic Affairs
College of the Virgin Islands

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SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the 1984 Annual Conference of the Southern Association for Institutional Research held in Little Rock, Arkansas, October 24-26, 1984. It was reviewed by the SAIR Publications Committee and was judged to be of interest and pertinent to others concerned with the research in higher education. This paper has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of Conference Papers.

Richard D. Howard
President, SAIR

PLANNING IN THE REAL WORLD OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Seldom, it seems, have I confronted a more formidable task than this, in making good on my acceptance of the invitation which was extended to me to address the political and human dimensions of the planning process. As I have analyzed my own dilemma, two reasons for it come to mind. First, as with each of us, the "real world" of my own institution is what consumes most of my waking hours; by and large, however, it seems often to be the antithesis of planning rather than its essence. I admit at the outset to coming with no tried and true formula for resolving the dilemma we are here to debate. Second, whether from inclination or many baptisms of fire, it seems likely that most of us can testify that while planning by the numbers may be a challenging intellectual exercise, much more than this is involved in developing a successful planning system. While meeting my responsibility of underscoring the importance of non-quantitative considerations in planning, I am sensitive to the possibility of preaching to the converted.

The "real world" of which I speak is the one that I have encountered in the course of 25 years as a faculty member and administrator in several free-standing institutions and in three state-wide systems. Reality for me has included service in a major, urban university within one of the largest and most centralized state-wide systems, in a small regional institution in a relatively decentralized system, and currently, in a free-standing, land grant college which has a monopoly on all higher education in its jurisdiction. As a line officer as well as chief planner, my current

responsibilities exemplify the linkage between theory and practice that is a theme of this paper.

It should also be mentioned that some time ago it was agreed that Dr. Starford would discuss the subject using a rational, quantitative approach, whereas I would offer a contrasting view, hopefully no less reasonable. By focusing on what I have termed the "real world" of planning, in order to urge greater attention to certain concerns, I surely have no intention of challenging the utility of either statistical data or rationality in planning. Both are needed. What is also needed is a sense of balance and a sensitivity to other considerations that are pre-eminent. We sometimes treat lightly the fact that we are not planning in a vacuum; planning is for and about people who behave in ways that cannot always be anticipated, but whose support is essential.

Three very different examples come to mind. During my tenure at California State University, Northridge, I served on a "people pockets committee" of the Campus Planning Board. One concern was that faculty, students, and staff lacked adequate places for comfortable, outdoor conversation, even though the many benches placed in parallel fashion along broad campus walkways would have exceeded any reasonable quantitative standard. The problem was that the physical configuration actually discouraged dialogue rather than promoting it. We recommended the obvious: move the benches into rectangular positions which would invite people to congregate and interact. Somehow, the human element had been left out of the original design by campus planners and, in that case, the omission was almost certainly approved (or unnoticed) by central office planners of the California State University System.

A second example relates to the personal rapid transit system, or "PRT," which was introduced some years ago at West Virginia University. The campus in Morgantown is spread out over a large area, but the hilly terrain and high density of development impose limits on both pedestrian and vehicular traffic. PRT is an adaptation of rail mass transit principles to a campus environment. The system could have been put in operation in any number of locations, but political factors made the difference in bringing it to Morgantown. Significant federal funding was put into the project as a result of the efforts of two powerful West Virginians: Senator Robert C. Byrd, former majority and current minority leader, and Representative Harley D. Staggers, for many years chairman of the House Committee on Interstate Commerce.

The third example is being played out at this moment in the non-academic setting of downtown St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. To deal with over-saturation of the largest parking area in the business district (and to help raise revenue), the local government made a hasty decision to convert an unregulated parking area to a supervised lot charging a rate of \$4.00 per day. Some 18 persons were employed to manage the lot, opened on September 24 and described as offering "comfortable parking." But again, a problem: regular users, primarily downtown workers, were given no meaningful input regarding the change. So the operation has been greeted with an unorganized, "silent boycott" from its inception as people find other ways to solve their parking problems, and the government's deficit worsens as it pays a large staff which is generating a bare trickle of income. (The boycott received unexpected help when the lot supervisor expressed to the media his hope that drivers parking in illegal areas, while trying to avoid the pay lot, would be issued \$25.00 tickets "left and

right.")

These are examples of the proposition that planning efforts, however rationally they may be constructed, depend significantly for their success or failure on political and human factors. Some good fortune along the way can be helpful, too.

At a WICHE conference some 20 years ago, Homer D. Babbidge, Jr., then President of the University of Connecticut, made an observation that is appropriate to my remarks. He stated:

The virtue of recent efforts to encourage institutional planning lies largely in the fact that it leads to organized planning efforts. Planning becomes more than what the President does while shaving. It becomes built in, institutionalized Now, herein lies another danger. As it becomes institutionalized, it becomes professionalized, and from there it's a short step to being separated from the main stream of institutional life.

Babbidge went on to say:

A principal purpose of planning is to ensure that an institution retains a degree of control over its own destiny [but] internally, we are in danger of surrendering that control to creeping ad-hocism [and] externally, we are in danger of being 'systemized,' or forced into a master scheme of some sort, state or regional, or even national.¹

Not unlike most institutions with a formal planning structure, ours at the College of the Virgin Islands is composed of a number of annual steps which allow for numerous access points into the process by an assortment of institutional officers and committees. The capstone takes place every February, when the Board of Trustees approves a list of "planning priorities" which has been developed and debated earlier by an all-College Planning Council. The Board engages in some discussion of the recommendations and a few questions may be asked. By and large, however, the issues that are raised relate to the various aspirations for the College that are held by individual

Board members. Questions are not asked about the quality of information or the amount of data supporting the recommendations. Therefore, at this final stage of approving the thrusts of the College for the next five-year planning period, largely "political" interests come into play and judgments are made, with relatively little consideration of "rational" inputs.

As a planner, I may lament the absence of concern for the "facts," as borne out by supporting studies and by the computer's unstinting generation of printout after printout. But as a student, teacher, and exponent of popular government, and specifically with regard to institutions whose governance is tied to public sentiment through the election or political appointment of trustees and regents, isn't this the way it ought to be? In our system we cannot expect the taxpayers to turn their institutions over to the professional planners and technocrats who may be insulated from the larger social cross-currents which affect higher education. The same basic view has been expressed by Irving Shain who, while rejecting the extremes of "complete participatory democracy" and the "budget analyst-program manager" model for planning, concludes that:

In the future, the strong centers of learning will exist because they have found an effective middle ground approach to resolving this problem, thereby maintaining the traditions of collegiality which are the basic requirement for effective management of a community of scholars.²

Another "real world" dimension which impacts upon a purely "rational" approach to planning involves the never-ending search for extra-mural funds. When a major gift or grant is proposed to a college or university, and when the funding source stipulates programmatic commitments that are not contemplated in the long range plan, do we reject the gift or alter the plan? We all know the answer

in most instances. The worst-case scenario in this area relates to federal grant applications--and I speak as a supporter of the federal role in higher education. Too often institutions, perhaps moreso the smaller, dependent ones, make hasty adaptations of existing plans and structures in order to meet the demands of federal funding agencies. In the rush to meet the application deadline, the long-range plan has been put aside, if not forgotten. Considerations of mission, priorities, and objectives get slighted. The uncertainties engendered while the proposal itself endures several lives are accepted all too willingly. No simulations are performed which could "play out" the consequences of alternate courses of action. Regrettably, one result may be to patch up the existing long-range plan to bring it into conformity with events that will have occurred independently of it.

This is vintage "real world" in which any relation to data-driven, "rational" planning is coincidental.

Still another concern has to do with how planning relates to governance on our campuses. Your institutions and mine have carefully designed processes by which planning takes place. These provide for broad representation of various constituencies, and they work according to a timetable which allows for participation in a predictable fashion. Ultimately, the products of this process receive the endorsements of presidents and trustees, at which time they become official policy. So far, so good. But what about all the committees tilling the soil of our colleges and universities the year-round on every possible subject--from student life to budgets to program accreditation by the dozens of external agencies which set standards for us? And what about the special committees and subcommittees we create to meet real or perceived needs, and which then produce

recommendations which may have far-reaching effects on policy matters and on the distribution of resources? "Creeping ad-hocism" is here and now, and linkages with rational planning procedures are tenuous at best.

We must seek ways to bring about an integration of these activities, without losing the excitement and spontaneity that mark a lively academic community. Babbidge's admonition of 20 years ago bears repeating:

The greatest single danger in educational planning is that it will ... be suffocated by considerations of strategy and tactics. The second greatest danger of planning is that it will result in a plan For there is something about 'a plan' that is truly ominous, a quality that is somehow compounded when it becomes a 'master plan' The plan, in short, can become a conservative, even stultifying influence upon a university. It can be railroad tracks across a meadow meant for meandering It can become a device behind which small men hide in an effort to protect themselves against threatening innovation. Every bright new idea can be dismissed as an expensive change order, and leadership can relax the eternal vigilance that is the price of vitality as well as of liberty.³

My purpose in these remarks is to emphasize the necessity for planners to make an accommodation with factors and forces, within and without our institutions, that tend to challenge the orderliness of our planning efforts. The notion of the college or university as a community of scholars in which participation is encouraged and consensus is pursued leaves no real choice. Political and human realities have legitimacy and preferential status in the planning process, and they can make it work. Excessive reliance on "rationalism" and quantification is no deterrent, obviously, from such failures as under-utilized campuses, programs without students, and physical designs that people refuse to accept.

I should like to make several additional observations on

different, but related, matters.

A single, bound document called a "long-range plan" for an institution is visually impressive and it makes logical, if tedious, reading. Such documents impress external agencies such as accreditation bodies and federal officials who are evaluating an institution for grant-in-aid purposes. But, in my opinion, either through omission or the tendency to focus on "micro" issues, they often do not enlighten one about major policy shifts in the life of the institution. We would do well to apply to planning the notion of the British constitution--not a single document, but an evolving collection of statements and customs.

I also suggest that, much of the time, the truly significant decisions within our colleges and universities are made or affirmed by line officers who act in a complex environment, affected by political and other factors within and without the institution. Only infrequently, it seems to me, is the planner involved as planner. This tendency can be offset to some degree when the planning professional is also a high-level line officer, thereby assuring a measure of protection against separation of the long-range plan from the main stream of institutional life.

Also, if planning is to have a substantial impact on what really happens, the president or chancellor must be personally committed to the planning process. He or she must give at least as much attention to the messages the system conveys as is given to yesterday's editorial in the local newspaper, or to the latest barrage from a legislator who never supports the institution anyway. Others can do the staff work, but planning that is meaningful and useful takes place because the president is "chief planner." I recall that

John Moore and I emphasized this as good theory at a SCUP conference several years ago. Today I present it as sound practice, too.

Finally, it strikes me that planning as a whole is done a needless disservice by elaborate breakdowns of institutional commitments into a succession of increasingly narrow objectives which are then assigned in detail from the top to the bottom of the organizational structure. The human and professional relationships which make the university the distinctive entity that it is are too important to the success of the whole enterprise, to be cast in stone simply as tasks to be carried out in regimented fashion. Imaginative techniques which help all elements to develop an institutional perspective will have a much more positive and lasting impact.

In the 1984 SCUP publication A Guide for New Planners, Donald M. Norris writes:

Planning seldom begins under textbook conditions. It almost never proceeds with perfect precision Good planning is more like an art than a science in that it depends on sage assessment and careful implementation based on the uniquenesses of particular situations The planner must continually manage the process to win new supporters and sustain those supporters already in the planning camp.⁴

This is planning as it ought to be in the real world of our colleges and universities. When perceived as being the servant of the institution rather than its master, the planning process can play a useful and positive role in institutional development. This requires settling for something less than the sense of omnipotence which can be a by-product of possessing all the data. And on our campuses, it just may be the only game in town.

NOTES

1 Homer D. Babbidge, Jr., "Design and Change in American Higher Education," Long-Range Planning in Higher Education (Boulder: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1965), p. 3.

2 Irving Shain, "Planning to Cope with the Unanticipated," Paper read at a planning conference sponsored by the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1976, p. 6.

3 Babbidge, loc. cit.

4 Donald M. Norris, A Guide for New Planners (Ann Arbor: Society for College and University Planning, 1984), pp. 3, 4, 16.